NO STRANGERS HERE

October 4, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Isaiah 25:6-9
Luke 14:15-24

"...Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled" -Luke 14:23 (NRSV)

The Bible is, happily, very serious about eating, and it takes very seriously what happens when people eat together. There are, in the Bible, stories about breakfasts on the beach, ceremonial meals, large outdoor picnics, pot luck suppers, wedding receptions, grand banquets, and intimate evening meals for three. On the very night of his arrest, the night before he died, he carefully arranged a meal; and later, after the resurrection, he invited them to breakfast, built the fire, cooked the fish.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" - a beloved sentiment and a precious image which we recall and recite together before we figuratively sit down at the table of communion.

And because it is so committed to meals and eating, the Bible also pays attention to the food, God's gifts - the menu!

> "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."

The older translation read:

"A feast of fat things" - which is, given what we now know abut the subject, probably much more accurate. Life is full, it seems, of "fat things."

Robert Farrar Capon is an Episcopal priest, theologian and gourmet cook, who loves God, his family and good food. He has written a combination cook book and theological commentary entitled The Supper of the Lamb. In it he observes:

> "...it was God who invented dirt, onions and turnip greens: God who invented human beings with their strange compulsion to cook their food."

In what could well be a commentary on Isaiah 25 and that banquet full of rich and fat things, Capon rhapsodizes:

> "Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet at our best we know better. Butter is... well, butter. It glorifies almost everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, plain and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And, if you put them all together, you get not sudden death, but Hollandaise - which in its own way is not one bit less a miracle than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, or a Bach fugue."

Food and cooking, Capon says, not only stop us dead in our tracks in wonder, "Even more, they sit us down evening after evening, and in the company that forms around our dinner tables, they actually create our humanity." [Preface, p. VII, VIII] We do our celebrating around the dinner table. When we are looking for romance we go to dinner with candlelight. When the business meeting is a little more than business it's over lunch. After the wedding we eat together; brunch after baptism, and after the funeral we eat together.

In point of fact, food sits us down less and less it seems. The particularly unattractive but description "grazing" fits, sadly, the eat-on-the-run-while-standing-at-the-counter habits of many of us. Because life is too full of "fat things," some gulp down a Slim Fast instead of a heavy lunch. Starbucks has even developed an invention which allows you to sip hot coffee while striding to work listening to your Walkman in a cocoon of isolation. Having a cup of coffee is something you used to have to sit down for and therefore a social act designed for sharing.

Isaiah's ancient wonderful vision of the heavenly banquet, of God preparing a meal of rich foods, assumes that something good happens when people eat together, something true is affirmed and celebrated. And the radical and, at the time, stunning thing about his vision of God's banquet was that it was for <u>all</u> people: not just the chosen people, not just for the racially pure and religiously orthodox, not just for the physically and socially acceptable, but for all people. The community formed at table, eating God's gifts of rich and delicious food, is radically inclusive.

→ But - several centuries after Isaiah's, the vision had become radically exclusive. You have heard about archeological

research around the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the religious community at Qum Ran, which became the quintessential expression of Judaism in the first century and the definer of orthodoxy. The image of the heavenly banquet was very important at Qum Ran but by the first century it had become again an elite, racially exclusive banquet. Only the good folk are at table. There are surely no Gentiles there. And there are no imperfect people present, no blind, lame, deaf or poor people. It is a very clean, orderly and well-to-do company of like-minded and like-looking friends.

So one day after he has committed two consecutive social faux pax - by healing a man on the Sabbath and then criticizing the way people scramble for prominent places at the table - he is sitting at table at a proper and elegant meal in the home of a prominent man, one of the guests proposes a toast, "Here's to eating together in God's kingdom!" And Jesus tells them a story which surely left everybody squirming.

A man gave a dinner party and sent out invitations. When his guests accepted, he made arrangements, slaughtered the animal, prepared it and started to cook it. Then, according to custom, he sent word back to his guests. "The meal is almost ready. Come now!" That's how it was done: invitation - response - preparation - and a summons to the banquet.

But in this story the guests who have already accepted the invitation start to drop out. In Semitic culture that is simply not done. In some places, not to honor an invitation you have already accepted is tantamount to a declaration of war. It is, everywhere, an insult. The excuses are absolutely ridiculous. No one buys a piece of real estate sight unseen, or a team of oxen, and no one accepts an invitation to a dinner party on his own wedding day.

The host is rightfully deeply offended. But his response is curious. Get more guests. Not the kind of people I normally have to dinners. In fact, invite the very people who never get invited to a dinner like this. When his servant fulfills the peculiar demand, there are still empty seats. Go get more. Go out on the highway and compel people to come in. An interesting detail: No one accepted after one invitation - particularly if you were from a lesser social class than the host. A second, more urgent invitation was normal. The messenger is instructed to compel, to urge them - literally to take them by the arm and lead them in to the table.

There is a very different picture of God's kingdom here and a radically different notion of how God's people are related to God and to one another.

Strangers become guests: outsiders are insiders: all people are welcome at the banquet of heaven. There are no barriers of race, gender, physical capability or incapacity. There are no barriers of genetics, or religion or ideology or sexual orientation or morality, none. There is a banquet of rich food and all are welcome and every seat must be filled. It was a radical critique of the way people thought in his day and in our own.

The tenor of our time is not all inclusive. In fact ethnic and racial exclusiveness has taken on a terrible new reality. "Ethnic cleansing" - is there an uglier notion in all of history than that? Do you read that term - which Serbian Christians use to explain why they are bombing defenseless Muslim families in Sarajevo - and find yourself wondering is this really happening? Why is this happening? - a mere fifty years after another ethnic cleansing project produced Auschwitz and Dachau, after which we said, "never again?"

I heard a professor of history at Columbia University, James Shanton, deliver a lecture, "Race and Ethnicity, An American Dilemma: A World Dilemma," in which he suggests that the greatest threat to the peace of the world in the years ahead is the renewal of ethnic pride and the exploitation of that pride for political purposes. The terrible events in what used to be Yugoslavia document his analysis. More urgently, Professor Shanton suggests that, with the majority rapidly becoming a minority in this country, with that day clearly in sight, when European-Americans will no longer be a majority, and in a time characterized more and more by open hostility between European-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans, our biggest challenge as a nation will be to find a common humanity which transcends race and ethnicity - something we have not had much success at doing.

Alex Kotlowitz, author of <u>There Are No Children Here</u>, spoke yesterday to our tutors and said that contact between white people and black people is decreasing and is substantially less than when he wrote the book five years ago.

In fact, the momentum is in the direction of separate - private - away from any sense of the community, the public.

Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian, has written a book with the intriguing title, <u>The Company of Strangers</u> in which he suggests that while the Christian religion teaches hospitality to the stranger as a virtue, increasingly we regard the stranger as the source of personal danger and threat. Our basic stance toward the stranger is suspicion and we reflect it by retreating to privacy every chance we get.

Palmer feels that suburban malls are an expression of our fear of public places, replacing public behavior which used to happen in the public squares - visiting, greeting, gossiping, with private, impersonal, pure shopping. I think that is part of the charm of the summer farmer's markets. It's not only good produce, but a kind of community is formed. If you go more than twice you get to know the growers and inevitably you see some friends and everyone seems to be enjoying a sense of public relatedness.

Two popular journalists have written recent editorials which support Parker's thesis that the weight of the culture tilts toward the private instead of the public.

Bob Greene was reflecting on a Sunday morning walk he took through the section of Columbus, Ohio, called Bexley, where he grew up and where I lived for a dozen years. It was a nostalgic reminiscence, until the end when he noted that "in the nicer sections of town the homes were still lovely, but very few had the names of their owners displayed on address signs in front, the way they used to. Instead, the signs on the lawns bore the names of security firms, announcing to would-be-burglars that the homes were wired and connected to the police station." Greene editorialized, "It's like this everywhere. Don't let strangers know your name: just tell them you are wary and well protected."

And Ellen Goodman, in a column entitled "In the 90s: Keep Out of Touch," observed that the venerable game of telephone tag has been altered fundamentally by the answering machine and voice mail. You win in the 1990s by "reaching out and touching technology. Only the losers end up talking to real people." Effective players wait till after five to return the day's calls, and end up talking to six answering machines in ten minutes instead of six people which would take thirty minutes. "A growing number of Americans have come to prefer voice mail to voices," she says. "A hundred years ago the telephone was invented to allow people to talk to one another. Now it's being used to help people avoid talk."

Hospitality is one of our oldest values. It does not mean being polite and inviting friends over for dinner on Friday night. The technical meaning of hospitality is love for the stranger and it is a radical and healing word in a world increasingly divided and fragmented by race, ethnicity, and religion.

And it is based on a radical vision of the human race as a unity, as a single family - related because of the unity of the creator. Hospitality - the stranger, the poor, lame, blind and outcast not as recipient of charity, but as dinner guest.

The church of Jesus Christ has a job to do. Our task is to proclaim and then model that vision to the world: not merely to

reflect the exclusivity and privatization of American life, but to contradict it, to be the kind of public community which welcomes as an equal, as a guest at the table any man or woman who comes. It is a very precious vision which we celebrate on this Sunday, remembering that Christian people of every race and nationality come to table today and together, in a bleeding, divided world, bear witness to the oneness of the human family.

"Go out on to the highway and compel them to come in," the host commanded. He had to do that, not because they didn't want to come in but because no one was going to believe that the great banquet was, in fact open, that there was a place at that table for everyone.

Grace is always unbelievable. You mean he wants me? I'm invited? You must be mistaken. I don't deserve that.

God is that host, obviously. It's a lovely image of God, tugging at your sleeve, taking you by the arm, guiding you to the banquet table.

I believe there are many people who don't come to church because they don't feel like they're good enough; people who long for friendship and fellowship but stay at arm's length because in their heart of hearts they don't think they belong.

And you and I - it is unbelievable, isn't it? God wants us at the table. There is a place for you.

So come - no matter who you are. No matter how you have distanced yourself, no matter what there is about you that has made you feel unacceptable, unworthy, undeserving.

Hear the words of our Lord.

Come - the food is prepared. Come - there are no strangers here.

Come - all is ready.

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Lord of all, you welcome us as guests...
Lead us to table and turn our hearts
so that we reflect your love, your grace,
your hospitality in our life together;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.